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Introduction: The Lineages of Cultural Studies

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Introduction: The Lineages of Cultural Studies

David Banash and Anthony Enns

Cultural studies has deep and vexed connections to two critical movements in the Twentieth century: Frankfurt school critique and Birmingham cultural studies. Indeed, just the difference between the words “critique” and “studies” encodes the differences in these two approaches, differences which still trouble the definition and practice of what has become over the past forty years the sprawling academic enterprise of cultural studies. For critics of the Frankfurt school, such as Theodor Adorno, mass culture was not simply dismissed, but given careful critical scrutiny. Its effect on its audience, and its role in expressing and legitimating the ideology of capitalism was carefully analyzed and critiqued. Art, however, remained one of the only spaces in which it was possible to embody utopian desires, and popular culture was simply a commodified reflection of the worst aspects of capitalism. Though this attitude was not significantly different from more traditional critics, the mere fact that mass cultural products were seen as valid objects of critical analysis testifies to the emerging importance of mass and popular culture in the postwar era.

Adorno’s contemporaries in the Birmingham school, such as Richard Hoggart, did not have the same reverence for high culture that animated both Adorno’s critical and personal taste. For Hoggart in particular, criticism was also an exercise in identity politics *avant la lettre*, and his work was often frankly autobiographical, examining the ways in which the working class used popular culture to construct a unique and valuable identity. Unlike the Frankfurt school’s outright dismissal of mass culture, critics such as Hoggart opened up the possibility of taking such subjects seriously, and finding within them real possibilities. This tendency was further developed by cultural studies scholars, who often chose to celebrate rather than

critique the objects of their analysis.

The history of cultural studies was therefore torn between two poles: critique and celebration. While subsequent generations of Birmingham school scholars, such as Dick Hebdige and Angela McRobbie, continued to celebrate mass culture, a relentless critique of such tendencies continued in the work of Douglas Kellner and others, who continued to reinvent the ideals and methods of the Frankfurt school. These two tendencies have also been augmented by a tremendous array of methodologies and perspectives, including feminism, race studies, postcolonialism, sexuality studies, as well as deconstruction and other theoretical methods, which over the past three decades have continually challenged cultural studies to reinvent itself. Through these new perspectives, new controversies have arisen. For those who continue to see cultural studies as primarily a critical discourse, scholars such as Tony Bennett and Michael Bérubé have argued that such criticism must be wedded to direct and active influence on government policy. At the same time, scholars have brought to bear the vocabularies of continental theory, from Kristeva to Deleuze, and used them to take on the world of mass media and subculture, objects traditionally associated with Birmingham school cultural studies. While many of these theory-driven projects have challenged the activism associated with traditional Marxist scholarship, the tension between criticism and celebration has remained a vexing issue, and for every scholar who writes a convincing critique of a given text, there is sure to be a rejoinder in the form of a passionate celebration of the resistant and utopian potentials of that same text.

Rather than fostering anxieties about the loss of some "authentic" cultural studies, or embracing critique over celebration, practical intervention over theory, the *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* seeks to incorporate all of these antagonistic approaches, seeing them not as mutually exclusive, but as equally important. We hope to avoid rigid orthodoxies and publish the best of both theoretical work and applied criticism on a range of issues, thus fostering conversations across disciplinary and ideological divides. In keeping with this mission, the articles presented here illustrate a variety of approaches to cultural studies, beginning with Corey K. Creekmur's interview with Andrew Ross, who discusses the legacy of the Birmingham school, as well as the challenges faced by contemporary cultural critics. Ross situates the birth of cultural studies "with the rise of the New Left, with the emergence of knowledge and culture as a vital part of the economic base, and with the mutation of higher education, which led to the restructuring of academic labor and the realignment of academic research with late modernity." He also discusses the potential danger of contemporary cultural studies devolving into what he refers to as "armchair theory." In order to maintain the tradition of the New Left, Ross calls for cultural critics to become more fully engaged with communities and labor issues, as evidenced by his own recent ethnographic work, such as his study of the Disney-created town of Celebration, Florida, or his upcoming book on the corporate workplace, and he even encourages his own students "to think of themselves as 'intellectual activists' rather than as 'career academics.'"

Jeff Lewis's essay "From Culturalism to Transculturalism" provides an overview of two conflicting cultural movements which have developed out of Birming-

ham school criticism: posthumanism studies and cultural policy, or what Lewis refers to as “cultural civics.” While posthumanism “abandons the possibility of a meaningful or fixed communicative form,” Lewis argues that a policy-driven cultural studies, following Habermas, is based on the notion of “a consensual communicative action within the public sphere,” which “provides the basis for understanding the actual conditions of ordinary people’s everyday struggles.” Lewis also suggests that this divide might be rethought using the concept of “transculturalism,” which he offers as an improvement on Richard Johnson’s notion of “culturalism.” Culturalism, Lewis argues, “fails to appreciate adequately the complex nature of culture” because it “only partially acknowledges the relationships between meaning and non-meaning, ideology and subjectivity, social reform, and social imagining.” Transculturalism, on the other hand, integrates the posthuman and the cultural policy movements by attempting to negotiate both “the semiotic” and “the material conditions of life.” In other words, “language and materiality continually interact within an unstable locus of specific historic conditions. However, our access to and knowledge of these material and historically defined conditions are necessarily filtered through an engagement with language and language wars.” Such an approach thus offers a more precise way of describing complex cultural events, and Lewis illustrates this methodology through an analysis of 9/11 and the Afghan War.

In “The Cultural Offices of Joe Strummer,” Brady Harrison employs a more traditional Birmingham school approach by performing a clearly celebratory reading of the life and music of Joe Strummer, former frontman for the British punk band the Clash. Harrison argues that Strummer’s recent work—as D.J. of the BBC’s world music show “London Calling” and as a “reborn folk-raga-rocker” in his new band The Mescaleros—represent “cultural offices” from which Strummer speaks “on music, life, politics, history, and more.” From these offices—as musician, D.J., producer, etc.—Strummer broadcasts songs which “communicate a faith in cultural openness, in human liberation and dignity, in the power of music to move people and to make them think, and that, at the same time, tilt against the foes of the disenfranchised, the working classes, and the vast majority of people who live beyond the privileges of the first world.” Harrison is careful to note, however, that there are also ways in which Strummer’s career might be subject to a far less celebratory critique:

[A]s a figure from the metropolitan center [London], he surveys and consumes the labor and products of the former colonies; he appropriates their musical styles and themes, and recasts them in a way understandable to other Westerners. He lifts songs and forms from their social and historical contexts; he perhaps contributes to their political and cultural emptying. They perhaps become—in their slick packaging and gleaming surfaces—commodity fetishes rather than expressions of lived experience.

Despite these negative possibilities, though, Harrison concludes that Strummer “seems also to believe in the possibility, if not quite the inevitability, of liberty and equality,” and that “the world he envisions might be calling itself into being no matter how much late capitalism might work to suppress it.”

In "Burn this Journal!: *Reconstruction*, the Value of Information, and the Future of the Journal," the editors of the on-line journal *Reconstruction* challenge cultural critics to rethink not only the ways in which cultural studies work is conducted, but also the institutions which receive and support it. They begin by offering a critical assessment of the structure of academic publishing itself, calling our attention to the ways in which the liberatory impulses of cultural studies are held in check by the conservative practices of the traditional peer review process. By rejecting this process and developing new methods of publishing academic scholarship, the editors argue that

Reconstruction contains the potential for intellectual projects that are themselves organic in their growth—living cultural texts which are not subject to the authority of individual scholars. As such, the concept of scholarly "authority," which is bound up in the concept of authorship, is surpassed by a vital, evolving, intellectual movement: no one voice speaks, instead there exists a chorus of articulated thought.

Attempting to put into practice the most radical and utopian rhetoric of the theorists of digital media, these editors envision a new mode of publication and education based on the possibilities of web publishing. In place of traditional academic hierarchies, the editors invite scholars to become equal partners in the journal "through the message boards, through accessibility, and through numerous projects that invite our readers to become our writers." The ultimate goal of *Reconstruction* is therefore not simply to publish contemporary cultural studies scholarship, but also to radically "change the way that scholarship is conducted by building new universities."

In contrast to the previous essays, Barbara M. Kennedy's "Choreographies of the Screen" questions traditional cultural studies approaches to film scholarship, and she argues that the methodologies of cultural critics typically fail to account for the actual, lived experience of watching films. According to Kennedy,

a cultural studies approach to film has rendered it a form of representational images and sounds through which to discern some overall sociological or ideological understanding of our realities. For example, questions of representation have highlighted political debates around gendered subjectivities or have provided discourse around the politics of identity. Consequently a cultural studies paradigm has primarily considered film a political form through which to critique and to challenge dominant ideological discourses to do with class, race, or gender.

While not dismissing the importance of these goals, Kennedy attempts to add to them other perspectives by mobilizing the critical vocabulary of Gilles Deleuze. According to Kennedy, "the pleasures and desires experienced through cinematic encounter may . . . lie outside the restrictions of a psychically constructed subjectivity," and she adds that "the cinematic experience might better be understood through different trajectories that might be creatively explored through the auspices of philosophical discourse." Although Kennedy's approach is borrowed from continental philosophy, she never loses sight of the fact that the subject she is dealing with is

popular Hollywood film, and the experiences she analyzes are a part of popular culture; she even chooses *Blade Runner*, a work of science fiction, as her key text. Through the concept of choreography, however, Kennedy asks us to rethink simplistic responses to such popular texts. She defines choreography as “a rhizomatic text, flowing through the cityscapes and bodies of contemporary cultural formations: T.V. music, dance, fashion, advertising, film—where these connect and assemble; where their own forces and intensities create new thoughts between, new feelings between, outside Cartesian patterns of logical discourse.” In other words, by examining the interactions of bodies with real texts, images, and screens, Kennedy looks for the spaces in between, which traditional cultural critics often overlook. In her reading of the scene in *Blade Runner* where Zhora is killed by Deckard, for example—a scene which many critics have interpreted as evidence of the film’s misogyny—Kennedy claims that “Zhora’s escape through the screen of her simulacrum through to the other side technologizes an escape from representation beyond image into the movement-image and affection-image. There is a pedagogy of the image whereby it is not just something that is actually seen.” In readings such as this, Kennedy points out that texts simply dismissed as reactionary or otherwise compromised in the terms of more traditional cultural studies might be rethought in terms of desire or affect:

Desire is not fixed or located within a representational space, neither is it abyssal or negative as we see in psychoanalysis. Desire is what makes things, forges connections, creates relations, produces machinic alignments. The clone’s (Zhora and the spectator) isolated psychoanalytic abyssal positioning is projected differently—through immanence—by virtue of movement and rhythm.

Kennedy asks us to consider new ways of interpreting popular texts, and of finding within them spaces for thinking and desiring differently.

It is our hope that this journal will continue to encourage and support a variety of cultural methodologies, and that the work presented here might suggest both the methods and benefits of bridging intellectual divides within the ever-widening field of cultural studies.